

(This article first appeared in "Stamp Collecting" in April 1964. John Nelson has given me permission to reproduce it. Stamp Collecting was taken over and incorporated into the B.P.F. Magazine which itself is now defunct. Stephen Steere brought the article to my notice and it made me realise that many of the newer members do not know the history of our hobby and this could be the stimulus to seek further. Ed. M.R.S.)

Over 70 years ago (this was written in 1964 remember), on June 18th, 1890, Joseph Sloper, civil engineer and inventor, died at his North London home in Archway Road, Upper Holloway. To the majority of philatelists Sloper's name may not be familiar, but to those interested in "PERFINS" or "SPIFS" he will be known as the man primarily responsible for the introduction and development of the process of perforating postage stamps with initials and devices with a view to affording them some protection against purloining and fraudulent use.

In his early working days, Sloper was a builder and decorator but there can be no doubt that his true ambitions lay in the field of invention in mechanical engineering. It was not, however, until he reached middle age that he began to fulfil these ambitions, for he was 44 when, on October 28th, 1857, he obtained his first grant of Letters Patent for an invention of an improved method of obtaining motive power for propelling ships and driving machinery. The principles of this invention are somewhat obscure and it seems unlikely that it was a particularly successful venture, but, even as he obtained his patent rights over it, Sloper was working on another project, the one for which he is best remembered today.

On September 1st, 1858, "JOSEPH SLOPER OF No. 215 OXFORD STREET IN THE COUNTY OF MIDDLESEX, BUILDER AND DECORATOR" petitioned for, and was granted by Her Majesty Queen Victoria, Letters Patent for his invention of "IMPROVED MEANS OF AND APPARATUS FOR INDELIBLY CROSSING OR MARKING BANKERS' CHEQUES, DRAFTS, DOCUMENTS OR OTHER THINGS, WITH A VIEW OF PREVENTING ERASURES OR FRAUDULENT DEALINGS THEREWITH".

The "Means" referred to, as explained in the specifications Sloper subsequently filed, was his idea of producing any

required crossing, word or words, letters, marks or devices by means of a number of perforations made through the documents, and so grouped as to represent such crossings, words and so on, inasmuch as the marks or devices so formed could not be removed as they might be if produced with ink. The "Apparatus" was the mechanical means developed by Sloper for the purpose of producing the perforations.

Firstly, there was the method employing a wheel or roller having the exterior edge or surface studded over with points grouped or disposed so as to form the required mark or device. This wheel or roller was to be pressed and rolled by hand (rather like the present-day decorator's roller) across whatever had to be marked, this having first of all been placed on a surface of wood, cork or other suitable material. The practical disadvantages of this method are quite apparent and there can be little doubt that it was abandoned at an early date.

The Second Try.

The second of Sloper's methods was by far the more suitable for the purpose, and forms the basis of the machines still in use today. Briefly, this consisted of a suitable hand-lever or screw press to which was fitted one of Sloper's specially constructed dies. The die was made up of three principal parts, namely, the "perforator" being a small block from which protruded the perforating pins made of steel wire and having flat ends with sharp edges, the "matrix" being a perforated metal plate, into the perforations of which the pins of the perforator fitted accurately, and, between the two, a "clearer", being a plate through which the pins passed, serving partly as a guide and partly to hold back the paper on the withdrawal of the perforator from the matrix. The operator placed the paper to be perforated in the opening between the clearer and matrix and, by operating the press, caused the perforator, being the only moveable part, to travel downwards, the pins passing through the clearer and the paper, punching small circular pieces of the paper down through the matrix. On the upward return of the perforator, the paper, being prevented from rising with the perforator by the clearer, was released.

To be continued.

Stamp Perforating an Afterthought

In Sloper's specification no mention was made to the perforation of postage stamps, but his patent rights in this respect were doubtless established by a clause to the effect that the invention was applicable to many uses "so long as its special nature of marking with perforations grouped or disposed as set forth (for preventing erasures or fraudulent dealings) be retained."

Although Sloper continued to perfect machines for perforating, cutting and stamping (and to obtain patent rights for such machines), something like 10 years seem to have elapsed before he came to appreciate the potentialities of his patented invention as a means of protection against theft of postage stamps used by business concerns, a few of whom were, at that time, gaining a measure of protection by having their names or initials printed on the back of their stamps. Possibly Sloper's own energies were being applied in other directions for, in 1866 he patented an invention (involving, it appears, nothing more than a series of pipes of various lengths and sizes) "for obtaining motive power applicable for driving machinery and for ventilating mines, buildings, ships and other spaces".

G.P.O. Refusal.

It was one thing for banks to perforate cheques with Sloper's machines in such manner as they pleased, but quite a different matter for holes to be made in postage stamps (which in order to be valid had to be "perfect and intact") without the official sanction of the Postmaster-General. The first request to the Postmaster-General for such sanction was made in October 1867 by Copestake, Moore, Crampton & Co., one of Sloper's early customers, but such a request was refused. The letter of refusal was handed by them to Sloper, who took immediate steps to arrange an interview at the General Post Office so that he could explain his system of stamp protection. This interview was followed by correspondence and an official enquiry inside the Post Office and in a letter dated March 13th, 1868, Sloper was advised that

the Postmaster-General would not object to the perforation of postage stamps in the manner prescribed by you, with a view to protect merchants and others, as far as possible, from the theft of the stamps used by them. The date of the letter, March 13th 1868, can be safely taken as the earliest date on which the perforation of stamps with initials and designs can have been carried out with the approval of the Post Office.

Pleased, no doubt, at having completed his first step towards official recognition, despite the Postmaster-General's evident lack of any real enthusiasm for his invention, Sloper commenced to develop what was to become known as the Sloper Security Service, both by perforating stamps for customers on his own machines, on which he was continually improving, and by supplying machines for the customer's own use. In 1870, Sloper, on requesting the Postmaster-General to provide him with a letter of recommendation which he could use when introducing his system to foreign governments, was able to get him to confirm that he authorised and recommended "for the public good" the use of Sloper's invention and, in 1871, in reply to a further enquiry, he was advised that the Post Office were going so far as to encourage the public to adopt his plan.

Patent Law, as it applied in Sloper's day, was contained in the Statute of Monopolies passed in 1623, of which Section 6 enacted that the duration of a grant of Letters Patent was to be for "the tearme of fowerteene yeares". On August 31st, 1872, therefore, Sloper's patent rights, as covered by his grant of 1858, expired, but he was not slow in his endeavours to extend the term of his monopoly. On December 10th, 1872, Sloper, then described as a Civil Engineer, of Walbrook House, Walbrook, in the City of London, was granted Letters Patent for "Improvements in Tools or Apparatus for Producing Perforations (Grouped to Represent Marks, Letters, Figures or Devices) upon or through Paper and other Materials".

Refinements.

The improvements were, in fact, refinements to the second of his 1858 machines, including the fitting of changeable dies and the